

Blu-Ray Review: Sergio Leone's Timeless 'Once Upon a Time in the West'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on June 1, 2011 - 9:39pm

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CHICAGO – Any conversation of the best Westerns in movie history that doesn't include Sergio Leone's "Once Upon a Time in the West" is incomplete. It's one of those rare films that has truly gotten better with age. I'm not sure if it's just that I appreciate it more the older I get, but I'm not alone. The film now ranks high on nearly every important list of the best movies ever made. Yes, it's that good, and the Blu-ray restoration, which hit stores this week, is a beauty.



Blu-Ray Rating: **4.5/5.0**

For young readers, perhaps this reference will take hold — Sergio Leone was the Quentin Tarantino of his day. Clearly, there was no director with more influence on QT than Leone with both men's emphasis on long scenes of dialogue, often punctuated by brief outbursts of violence. The comparison holds even more with "Once Upon a Time in the West" because, like so much of Tarantino's work, it took films that had come before and distilled them into something that worked both as homage and on its own. "West" wouldn't exist without films like "Stagecoach" or "The Searchers" and yet it is also so completely unique.

Even just the opening scene of "Once Upon a Time in the West" is a mini-masterpiece. Three men who clearly have ill intentions wait for a train. A man (Charles Bronson) gets off the train and notices that they didn't bring him a horse. The tension, the violence, the framing — it's astonishing. And it simply never stops from there. Balancing Leone's visual artistry (that contains so many shots that could be framed and hung on a wall) with some of the strongest performances the genre has ever seen, including the great Claudia Cardinale and Henry Fonda playing against type, "Once Upon a Time in the West" is riveting every time you watch it.



Once Upon a Time in the West was released on Blu-Ray on May 31, 2011

Photo credit: Paramount Home Video

And it's even more riveting in HD. Including both the restored and theatrical versions of the film (watch the full version, trust me), the film looks absolutely amazing. Leone's use of lighting (expertly dissected in the commentary track by none other than John Carpenter) requires a perfect visual presentation and this is one of the best I've seen for a Western. Ever. I was lucky enough to see the restored version of "West" on the big screen and this looks just as good. The audio is similarly strong.



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Photo credit: Paramount Home Video

The special features have all been previously available and they're great, especially a commentary track with multiple participants including

filmmakers influenced by "West" like Carpenter, John Milius, and Alex Cox, along with cast & crew, including Bernardo Bertolucci, who crafted the story with Leone and Dario Argento. Hearing Carpenter say "Ouch, it was a bad day for that guy" after someone gets shot is gold for movie historians who grew up loving both "Halloween" and the Spaghetti Western. Well, at least it is for me.

Why not 5 stars? There's nothing new. And, no, an HD version of the trailer doesn't count. This is a 5-star release in film and HD quality and special features, but I wish the opportunity had been taken to offer something to fans spending money again on a film they've already paid to own. If you never bought "Once Upon a Time in the West," this is a 5-star release. It's one of the best movies ever made.

Synopsis:

Sergio Leone's monumental picture, here in its original form, ranks among his most admirable achievements. In the dying days of the Old West, a struggle to control water in a dusty desert town embroils three hard-bitten gunmen in a epic clash of greed, honor and revenge. Henry Fonda stars in his most sinister role as Frank, a hired killer who ruthlessly slays an entire family. Jason Robards plays Cheyenne, an infamous bandit framed for slaughter. And Charles Bronson is The Man, a mysterious loner determined to exact vengeance for a grudge he refuses to divulge. An influence on countless directors, Leone's masterpiece is considered among the greatest Western's ever made.

Special Features:

- o Commentary featuring Directors John Carpenter, John Milius and Alex Cox, Film Historians Sir Christopher Frayling and Dr. Sheldon Hall and Cast & Crew
- o An Opera Of Violence
- o The Wages Of Sin
- o Something To Do With Death
- o Railroad: Revolutionizing The West
- o Locations Then & Now
- o Production Gallery
- o Trailer

"Once Upon a Time in the West" stars Henry Fonda, Charles Bronson, Jason Robards, and Claudia Cardinale. It was directed by Sergio Leone. It was released on Blu-ray on May 24th, 2011.



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